

Reasons for non progression to HE among vocational early years students

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This chapter described a study that was designed and carried out to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for non-progression to HE (HE) amongst vocational Early Years students on a Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE) Diploma programme. The research took place at Longley Park Sixth Form College involving second year CACHE Diploma students and was carried out by the Information, Advice and Guidance Officer at the College as part of the Higher Futures project. Longley Park Sixth Form College is a widening participation college, which aims to raise aspirations and broaden horizons among its learners. The college is based in North East Sheffield; an area which has traditionally low levels of participation in Further and Higher Education. Since opening in 2004, just over 800 students have progressed to HE from Longley Park, with the first cohort graduating in June 2009. Over 60% of all College students to progress to HE have gone on to attend Universities within the city, indicating a strong trend towards favouring locally based provision.

Early Years students at Longley Park are part of the Higher Futures project, through which they receive intensive support with HE choices and applications. However despite this work and students being aware of the increasing demand for graduates in the Early Years sector, 45% of the CACHE diploma second year cohort did not apply to HE in the 2008-09 cycle. This was, however, an increase on the proportion of applications seen in the previous year, perhaps indicating that the Higher Futures initiative had started to have an impact. The students who did apply in the 2008-09 were highly successful in gaining places, with several students achieving places on competitive Early Years Teaching degree courses.

There is a wealth of existing research regarding issues surrounding widening participation to HE in general, and some more specific examples which relate more directly those studying Early Years related courses. Two of the most relevant studies, carried out by Bingham and O'Hara in 2004 and 2007, focused on widening participation to Early Years degrees at Sheffield Hallam University. In their two studies, Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) concluded that the three key factors linked to participation in HE were family background, student finance concerns and worries regarding academic skills and pastoral support. In their studies, Bingham and O'Hara were specifically referring to HNC/HND students progressing to full degrees, but it is interesting to consider whether the key themes uncovered are reflected in the findings of this project working with level 3 students considering progression to HE. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter

Another relevant piece of research is that conducted by Heath, Fuller and Paton (2007) at the University of Southampton. This work focused on how social networks influence decision-making with regard to HE, with emphasis on people who have the entry qualifications to access HE but have chosen not to do so. In this regard, it is interesting to compare how the findings of Heath et al (2007) compare with the findings of this research. Do the non-participating students in this project share similar views of the influence of social networks, for example family and friends? Furthermore, the Heath et al research has useful findings from a methodological perspective. The authors note that many projects focussing on issues around widening participation involve participants who have actually accessed HE, despite the barriers they may face, rather than being conducted with non-participants. They point out that this may be due to the difficulties of accessing people not in the formal

education system, but clearly this is a methodological weakness. Thus, the findings of Heath et al have been important in terms of the planning of this project and the decisions made in terms of participant involvement in the research.

The study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the main reasons why CACHE Diploma students decide not to apply to HE?
- How do these compare to the views of CACHE Diploma students who decide to progress to HE?

Research design and methodology

The research design evolved significantly over the course of this project in response to several key factors. Originally, second year CACHE Diploma students in the 2008-09 cohort received a briefing about the research within class, and were given an information sheet about the project. Second year students were chosen as research participants as they were the ones who would have already made their decisions with regard to progression to HE, whereas first year students would perhaps have still been unsure about their choices. Following this, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to gauge reasons for either progression or non-progression to HE. For those who had decided to apply it gathered information such as choice of institution and course. The questionnaire was also designed to ascertain students' level of awareness of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status, a postgraduate award currently being phased in to the sector.

Students who agreed to participate also engaged in a group session where they worked together in small teams to generate ideas of why they chose to apply/not apply to University. Teams were predominantly a mix of students who were applying and students who were not, in order to promote discussion about the reasons for progression and non-progression.

Following the initial analysis of the questionnaire and group activity responses, the students were briefed about the next stage of the research and volunteers were sought to take part in individual interviews. However, it was found that students were reluctant to participate in individual interviews. The research design was therefore modified and focus groups were offered instead. Several members of the second year CACHE Diploma 2009-10 cohort were asked to participate in a focus group. Some of these were identified by the group teacher as being students who would perhaps be willing to participate and others were chosen through random selection from a group who identified themselves as being non-university applicants. The students identified by staff were then approached individually and invited to participate. Similarly, the students selected at random were asked in class if they would like to take part. In order to ensure that the focus group did not unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes with regard to non-applicants to HE, the design of the focus group was carefully constructed to ensure that no negative assumptions were created within the group with regard to choice surrounding progression to HE. For this reason, the initial group of potential participants consisted of a mix of students in terms of their intended progression routes. In total, 8 students were invited to take part (3 applicants 5 non applicants). Of these, 5 agreed to participate (3 applicants and 2 non-applicants), 2 were unable to attend due to prior commitments and 1 declined the invitation. Of those who accepted the invitation to participate, only 2 students attended (both university applicants). One of the students who was unable

to attend due to prior commitments took part in an individual discussion at an alternative time. Several of the students who had agreed to participate were given a reminder on the day of the focus group, but two of these still failed to attend (both non-applicants).

The students who did attend were asked a series of questions based around key themes which emerged from both the questionnaire results and also the background research, such as the influence of family and friends on the decision making process and the key advantages/disadvantages they perceived with regard to progression to HE. The approach taken was semi-structured, which allowed for some flexibility. The student who participated in an individual discussion was asked a similar set of questions with the same semi-structured format. Prior to participating, the focus group participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire in order to ascertain basic details about their background which they may not have felt comfortable divulging in a group situation, for example their family's educational background.

Several issues were encountered during the formation of the research design. Firstly, the sampling was an issue. Several methods of sampling were used, as outlined above, including self-selecting samples, and samples guided by teacher input. Each of these have advantages and disadvantages, but clearly there was an issue around the teacher led sampling choice, as all the students in the group were not given equal opportunity to participate in the focus group. However, it was felt that given the various time constraints of the project, only approaching students who would realistically be willing to participate was important and so this choice of sampling method was utilised. Furthermore, there was an ethical issue surrounding the design and questions of the focus group, with the possibility of reinforcing negative stereotypes with regard to not applying to HE, as outlined above.

Data analysis and findings

Questionnaire data was analysed using a tally chart and totals for each option were generated from this. The qualitative data gathered from the group activity was recorded in a document in order to identify key themes and allow responses to be compared and contrasted. All the data, both quantitative and qualitative was recorded in a Word document so that the key findings were clearly accessible for analysis. Analysis of the interviews consisted of transcribing the discussions held and colour coding participant responses according to key themes. This meant that key themes which emerged from the discussions were clearly visible and could be linked back to the questionnaire results.

A total of 18 students participated in the initial questionnaire and group work exercise, comprising 13 students who had made an application to University and 5 who had not. The initial questionnaire stage of the project resulted in some interesting preliminary findings. From the questionnaire, designed to gather mainly quantitative data, a distinct trend immediately emerged amongst students who had not applied to HE in terms of their reasons why – all of the respondents stated that they did not want to continue studying. This trend is reinforced by the qualitative participant responses in the group activity, with students making statements such as *'don't want to cope with uni work'* and *'fed up of studying'*. Another key trend which emerged was the desire to gain more experience of the world of work. 3 of the 5 (60%) respondents cited this as a reason for not progressing to HE, and again this was reinforced by qualitative responses, with respondents saying they want to *'gain experience'* and *'know what the world of work is like'*. Interestingly, only 2 of the 5 (40%) of the non-HE applicants cited student finance as a concern within their

questionnaire responses, but this emerged as a much stronger theme in the qualitative data, with participants making comments such as *'Don't get in debt'*. Another interesting piece of information to come out of the questionnaire was the fact that out of the 18 respondents, only 3 (16%) stated that they were unaware of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status and the drive for graduates in the Early Years workforce, illustrating that students clearly had a general awareness of this issue. The questionnaire results also showed that of the 13 students who had applied to HE, only one had not applied to the most local University, Sheffield Hallam. The majority of students had applied to universities within the Yorkshire and Humber region, with only a few students stating they had applied to Universities outside this area, indicating a strong preference for local HE provision.

Three key themes emerged from the focus group held with students intending to apply to University. Firstly, they felt that a key factor in their decision to apply to University was the availability of courses at local universities (within daily travelling distance). When asked to consider what they would do if their courses were not available within the local area, they agreed that they would probably not apply:

Researcher: If you couldn't go to a local University, if you had to move away, would you go?

Participant: No, I don't think I would, no.

This reinforces the findings of the questionnaire and group work as outlined above. Linked to this factor was that of debt and financial concerns. The participants agreed that this was one of the main disadvantages of going to University, and that it was also a key factor in their decision to stay at home and study. However, when asked to discuss the issue of student finance in more detail, they agreed that due to the support available, such as grants and bursaries, they felt able to cope financially, commenting that *'I'll probably be eligible for a grant as well so that's alright'*. One participant also made the point that as the repayments were taken in a similar way to tax, she felt more comfortable about the repayments and being in debt: *'the fact that you don't even see the money go out of your bank, it's just like a tax'*. When asked about the influence of their friends and family on the decision making process, participants initially concurred in the view that they had not been influential in any way. One participant made the point that none of her family had been to University before, and were relaxed about her making her own decision. However, when asked if an unsupportive family would have put them off applying to University, they agreed that it would have, as they would have probably had to move out, linking back to the other theme of staying at home and commuting to University, *'if they weren't supportive then we'd obviously have to move out'*. Therefore, there appears to be some ambiguity with regard to the importance of family support. It is clear that the participants feel that they have made a choice independently without being pressured by their family in any way, yet they are aware that without the tacit support of their family, they would probably have chosen not to go. Thus, it can perhaps be interpreted that in some cases family support has an implicit, rather than overt role to play in HE related decisions.

Another student who participated in a separate discussion also raised a number of interesting points. The student had originally intended not to apply to University, but had changed her plans and decided to apply. When asked about the reasons for this change, she cited anxiety about not getting the grades required for University as the main reason for originally not making an application. The student cited positive encouragement from teachers, and a discussion about her likely grades as the main reason for her change of plans, as well as positive support from her family. In this

case, the role of family support has clearly taken a more overt role in the decision-making process, with the participant identifying it as a key factor.

Discussion

From the students who did participate in the research, it is clear that the availability of local HE provision, the level of financial support accessible and family support were key influencers in their decision to progress to University. This has several implications with regard to informing the practice of Information, Advice and Guidance work. Firstly, it is evident that information about the range of options open to students, and also the financial support available to them should they choose to continue their education is crucial in terms of supporting students through the decision making process. Also, work with parents/carers is important as these clearly play an important role in students' decisions, whether in an overt or more subtle way.

Another key factor which emerged from the finding of the research was the importance of students' belief in their academic ability and their desire to continue studying. Thus, it is clear that with regard to academic ability, the encouragement and realistic prediction of grades on the part of teachers has a key role to play in order to ensure students are fully aware of their potential to achieve.

It is clear that the findings outlined above are closely linked to those of Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) in terms of the importance attached to perceptions of academic ability, family influence and concerns about student finance. In the case of the research carried out at Longley Park, participants identified these as significant factors in their decision making process when choosing whether or not to progress to HE. In the Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) research studies these factors were also perceived by students already engaged in the HE system as being crucial in terms of their progression. Thus, it can perhaps be argued that there is a degree of consensus amongst those considering HE and those who have already made the decision with regard to the key influencing factors on the decision-making process.

Furthermore, perhaps the most fascinating conclusion which can be drawn from the research is the problematic nature of engaging students who are not applying to HE. As also found by Fuller et al (2007), throughout this project there were issues with finding students who were not applying to HE who were willing to participate in the research. Fuller et al (2007) also encountered problems when gaining access to non-participating students as they were not in the education system. In this research, access to students was not an issue, as they were still engaged in the education process, but they were still reluctant to participate in the research. This is a distinct contrast to the reactions of students who were applying to University, as these students were much more willing to participate and share their views. If time were available for further research, it would be interesting to explore the reasons for this.

Recommendations for practice

Several key messages for practitioners can be derived from the research findings. Firstly, it is important to ensure that accurate information about HE options is communicated to students to enable them to make informed choices. With reference to the significance that participants' placed on local provision, it is perhaps pertinent to focus on regional opportunities when delivering this information. Alongside this, information regarding student finance arrangements is also essential, as it was

clearly identified by the participants that knowledge and understanding of this prevented finance from becoming a barrier. Additionally, it is vital to ensure that students have realistic expectations of their predicted grades in advance of making their progression choices. As such, involving their subject teachers in the decision making process is a key part of assisting students to make decisions. The involvement of students' family members is also crucial, as the research clearly demonstrates that students feel their family members are key influencers when making their decisions.

References

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